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Serving Idaho's Citizen Legislature

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Advance Planning for the 2020 Interim and 2021 Legislative Session

In response to COVID-19, many state legislatures are exploring alternatives to the manner in which they conduct their work to protect the health of legislators, staff and the public. Some Legislatures are adopting procedural changes to provide for legislative activities that comport with their constitutional, statutory and rules framework.

Members of legislative leadership asked LSO, the Secretary of the Senate and the Chief Clerk of the House to plan potential options the Legislature could consider to revise the manner in which it conducts its work. To that end, a small group of LSO staff, the Secretary of the Senate, and the Chief Clerk of the House are approaching this task for the Idaho Legislature; in addition, a handful of legislators including Senator Winder, Representative Harris, Senator Stennett, Representative Rubel and Representative Nilsson Troy, are participating as legislative liaisons to the group. The group's work includes providing options for temporary revisions to legislative processes, such as potential revisions to joint and chamber rules, and upgrades to the Legislature's audio/visual systems. This work is being developed through the lens of respecting the Legislature's legal framework and the public's ability to observe and participate in the legislative process. It should be noted that the following options are for the Legislature's consideration. Any changes to the manner in which the Legislature conducts its business are for the Legislature to determine.

Options

The group is focusing on three options. Each of these present unique challenges but appear to be manageable from a technical perspective.

1. Social distancing work: This envisions legislators conducting their work in the Capitol but physically spaced according to current social distancing guidelines. This approach requires technology upgrades, temporary desks in chambers and committee rooms and other measures.
2. Remote work: This option allows legislators to conduct their work remotely, including attending committee and floor sessions electronically from locales other than committee rooms and chamber floors. This could include legislators attending meetings electronically from their

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Statehouse offices/cubicles, from Statehouse conference rooms or perhaps from locations outside the Statehouse. Public testimony and virtual attendance could also be accommodated via electronic means.

3. Hybrid work: Hybrid work is a blending of the two approaches discussed above. This envisions a scenario where some legislators meet in the Statehouse in a socially distancing manner while other legislators may participate remotely via zoom meetings or webinars. A hybrid approach could provide for public testimony in a similar manner, i.e., ensuring either socially distanced testimony or remote electronic testimony.

Some Particulars

Because the hybrid work is already being used (and requested by members) during interim work and may be requested during the 2021 session, our planning is geared toward accommodating that option. Further, the A/V improvements needed to accommodate hybrid work will also accommodate both of the other two options, i.e., social distancing and remote work.

Currently, the Senate is considering an approach that would likely involve many legislators being present but socially distancing on the Senate floor while other legislators may participate via zoom from within the Capitol or, perhaps less likely, from off-site office space. The Senate will need a way to display remote (zoom) participants in the chambers as well as transmitting events in the chambers to the zoom participants.

The House is considering a similar approach, with details still being developed, including the possibility of working in a split-chamber fashion divided between the third-floor chamber and EW42 (House Revenue & Taxation Committee Room), with audio and video transmitted back and forth via enhanced in-house systems, as well as remote participants using the same zoom technology as the Senate. The House will need to be able to duplicate its calendar/voting board as well as display live video of third-floor chamber proceedings in EW42 while also sending the video feed of proceedings in EW42 up to monitors on the House floor. The House will also need a way to display remote (zoom) participants in both locations.

The proposed technology upgrades accommodate for reasonable locations for distancing and remote participation as well as any possible split-floor formation.

Standing committees are currently expected to meet in their usual rooms, redesigned for social distancing of members who are present as well as for remote participants using zoom meeting or webinar technology. With the new distancing-oriented design of the hearing rooms, there may be reduced room for public seating. We will plan to set up overflow viewing options in other locations throughout the building.

Technology Upgrades—Details

The technology improvements needed include an upgraded A/V system capable of handling echo cancellation at a greater level of efficiency than our current system offers and upgrading our A/V distribution network. This includes upgrades on the third floor—in the Senate Chambers, the House Chambers and the JFAC room. The improvements include replacing the standard input cards with Acoustical Echo Cancellation (AEC) input cards. Also, this includes upgrades in both the West Wing

committee rooms and East Wing committee rooms. Because the two wings currently have different systems (one wing has slightly newer technology than the other), the upgrades will be slightly different; however, following the upgrades both wings will have the same improved capabilities.

Throughout our network, current A/V equipment will need to be replaced and enhanced to accommodate video conferencing and PowerPoint presentations. This will allow sharing of video from a single source to multiple end points (e.g. in split House of Representatives, or committee room overflow/remote work scenarios).

Along with the hardware upgrades, a considerable amount of A/V system programming work will be required to increase the functionality of our existing systems/programs to the broader capabilities needed.

In addition, IPTV will require hardware/software improvements to accommodate the improved legislative A/V systems. This will allow IPTV to stream—both video and audio—from all committee rooms and both chambers, helping to ensure that the legislature’s work is transparent and may be viewed by the public across the state.

Finally, the upgrades should allow for remote committee testimony from across the state, as well. LSO programmers are already working on that aspect of the project.

Conclusion

Earlier this month the Idaho Capitol Commission unanimously approved the A/V upgrades described in this memo. Funding of approximately \$1.2 million was secured last week through the Governor’s Coronavirus Financial Advisory Committee. The Department of Administration’s Division of Public Works (DPW) approved DPW and LSO to enter into public works contracts to begin the project. Work is now beginning and the upgrades should be completed by no later than October 1.